SEMPER REFORMANDA-ALWAYS BEING REFORMED

October 30, 1988

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 2:18-22
II Corinthians 5:16-21

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins;...new wine is for fresh skins."
-Mark 2:22 (RSV)

"...my conscience has been taken captive by these words of God. I cannot revoke anything, nor do I wish to; since to go against one's conscience is neither safe nor right; here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." [Luther's Reply at the Diet of Worms, April 18, 1521]

There are moments in time which change everything. There was a moment when you said something or did something foolish, brave, honest... "Yes," or "I do," or "I will," or "no," or "maybe," or "let's try it," or "I'll take it," and your history has been profoundly different ever since.

One of those moments in history happened on the afternoon of April 18, 1521, in the city of Worms, Germany. The words spoken on that occasion are on the front of the bulletin. It was one of my own children who told me recently that for years she thought the "Diet of Worms" was what the Pope made Martin Luther eat for causing so much trouble.

The Diet of Worms was a meeting of the Imperial Court of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles V had brought the court to Worms to shore up his weak political authority in Germany. There was lots of business to attend to and the Diet began to meet in November of 1520. But nothing turned out to be as important as a hearing for a trouble-making Augustinian monk and teacher of theology, by the name of Martin Luther. The Pope had excommunicated Luther. His books had been burned. Now the Pope wanted the Emperor to declare Luther an outlaw and imprison him, perhaps execute him. Luther's German supporters wanted him to have a day in court. For his part Luther still thought he was a loyal son of the church, only desiring its reformation. It was October 31, 1517 - four years earlier - that he had publicly expressed his convictions. He still hoped for reconciliation.

So he appeared at the Diet of Worms and was shown a row of his books and writings - all condemned by the Vatican. He was asked to recant them.

He requested a day to think about it. The next afternoon he admitted that he may have been a little too vehement in his personal attacks, but that he could not retract the essence of what he had written. The Emperor could not believe his ears and cut Luther off... And it was then that Luther cried out - "My conscience has been taken captive... it is not safe or right to go against one's conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, God help me. Amen."

A month later the Diet placed its ban on him. By that time he was in hiding, translating the New Testament into German and writing the magnificent hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God." It was now clear that whatever else was happening in the incredibly complex historical mix of economics, politics, emerging nationalism, one thing was certain. God was reforming the church and new forms were now necessary; old traditions had to change or be broken; new structures were pressing to be born. It was becoming clear that it had a great deal to do with something Jesus had said 1,500 years earlier about not putting a new patch on an old garment, or new wine into old skins.

The Protestant Reformation literally exploded in Germany. Whole countrysides became Lutheran because the Prince sided with Luther instead of Rome. Wars were fought (what a fascinating experience to travel through Southern Germany and Austria and see monuments to the heroes who fought off the Protestants from the North). New traditions were begun.

In France and Switzerland Protestant ideas took a new shape under the influence of a brilliant, feisty Frenchman, John Calvin. The Reformed branch of the Reformation created a new church with a whole new way of looking at itself and a new name - based on the ancient office of the Presbyter. This branch of the Reformation created a slogan which its heirs still like to use.

"Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda"
"The Church Reformed, Always Being Reformed."

They understood, as they looked back from their perspective, that reformation must be a permanent characteristic of the church. If we simply celebrate a 16th century event every year, we will have fallen back into the very pattern which made Reformation necessary, and altogether have missed the point.

The Protestant principle is that reformation is a process necessary to the church, not an event that happened 471 years ago.

To be a Reformed Christian is to know and understand that encrusted, petrified tradition is a major barrier to lively, honest, faithful religion. It is to know and believe and trust that God's spirit is what agitates for reform and renewal and change. And it is to humbly confess that we have not always learned, understood or believed; and that our clinging to tradition has caused, us on occasion, to be irrelevant, unfaithful and and sometimes even a party to tragedy.

The day I prepared this sermon two Protestants were killed in Northern Ireland. Within a week the Protestant para-military will

retaliate and people will die whose only offense was being born Catholic. As I enjoyed myself, in the safety of my study, browsing through my beloved history books reading again about 1521, and as I worked with the text for Mark 2 about new wine and old wineskins, I recalled that I was brought up in a time and place when a widely-held religious tradition was that Catholics and Protestants did not regard one another as Christian. That tradition was expressed when a Catholic friend would go a block out of his way to avoid walking in front of a Methodist Church, when my standing in line at the confessional in the Cathedral, waiting for my friend, caused a major family crisis, and when the most creative advice the Presbyterian Church offered young people about inter-faith relations was "don't date a Catholic." I am grateful that in my lifetime at least, most of these traditions - several hundred years old - have disappeared. We now acknowledge that Protestants and Catholics agree on most of the issues that matter: that we are, in God's economy, one people of God, one Holy Church and that slowly, but surely, we must listen to the Spirit that calls us into the future, as one body of Christ.

I also recalled one of the most unforgettable and disturbing experiences I ever had. We were at Corrymeela, an Ecumenical Peace Community near Ballycastle, Northern Ireland, dedicated to working for reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants. There were four of us - two of us ministers. We were invited to be part, anonymously, of an evening with a group called simply "Belfast Mums." There were a dozen of them - all Roman Catholic - all poor - all with husbands either in jail or in serious trouble - all on welfare. Corrymeela simply invites them up for a weekend, takes care of the children, and lets them do what they want to do, go for walks, read, or spend two days in bed. It is a lovely gift and a desperately needed break from the daily grimness in which they lived. They warmed up to us after a while. We talked some but mostly listened... and then one of them said, "Let's sing one for Bobby," Bobby Sands, IRA hero who had recently starved himself to death in a British prison. It was a poignant, sad and powerful moment as they sang about Ireland and Irish heroes, hatred for the British, and they all wept... and the evening ended. The next morning at breakfast I saw a few of them at the table, greeted them warmly and they turned away... I tried again with another group. They nodded, without smiling. I asked one of the staff members what was going on. She said, "they found out you're a Presbyterian minister." To them, "Protestant Presbyterians" are the enemy. To belligerent "Prods," "Papists" are enemy. Robert Coles calls it the rebirth of "Tribalism" and it shows no sign of abating.

This process of reformation is bigger than any one of us. If it has any comforting possibility it is only insofar as we understand that it is Jesus Christ who is the reformer and that the best any of can and must do is lay our prejudices, our bigotry, and our desperate hold on our traditions - lay all of it at the foot of the cross on which he died; We must then muster the courage and grace to respond to the leading of his spirit. Reformation Sunday is not a day to fly the banners of muscular Protestantism. That's what it used to be: a time to beat the drums of Protestant triumphatism. But there has been enough of that. It is, I propose, a day to stand at the foot of the cross and to know again that he died to make us - all of us - part of new creation and that means "semper reformanda - always reforming."

At the very beginning of the story, according to Mark, Jesus the Christ runs into religious tradition. In a brilliant sequence Mark shows us Jesus in trouble with the religious authorities for disregarding religious tradition. He is in trouble for healing, for associating with unclean people, for not fasting and for deliberately breaking the Sabbath law. In each instance the respectable religionists, the keepers of the traditions, challenge him. It is in the middle of that situation that he declares himself...

"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment: if he does the patch tears away from it, the new from the old and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins; and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins." Jesus' first antagonists were sincere religious people who were so preoccupied with their religious traditions that they had quite forgotten the substance the traditions were designed to preserve.

That's the point. Religious traditions, when they become institutionalized, become petrified. Jesus erupted into the midst of rigid religious traditionalism, with a new message of God's love and God's kingdom which exists across the religious tradition and includes all manner of people.

There are no Catholics or Presbyterians or Lutherans or Baptists in God's kingdom.

The late Alan Paton, writing in and perhaps about his beloved South Africa, said:

"Christians often imagine that the danger to Christianity and true religion is communism. The greatest danger to Christianity in Africa is pseudo-Christianity. And the marks of pseudo-Christianity are easy to recognize; it always prefers stability to change; it always prefers order to freedom; it always prefers laws to justice; and it always prefers what it calls realism to love."

We need a "sunset law" on all religious traditions, someone said. That's an overstatement, obviously. Jesus didn't say, "throw out the old garment - or discard the old wineskins." What we really need is a healthy skepticism about our own traditions: which is simply to say that we need to be reforming Christians.

It will be a challenging time to be the church in the future. It will be challenging for those of us who are the church here - to be honest and relevant on North Michigan Avenue in the 21st century. It's going to be challenging to be Christ's church in a new world of incredible possibility and incredible tragedy: a world with the knowledge and ability to remedy many of the scourges of the human race - hunger, epidemic, disease, war; but a world quite willing, eager indeed to deplete its resources, in fact to poison its own people in order to manufacture weapons of death... a world in which some of us enjoy incredible wealth, comfort, leisure, health care. (Yesterday, coming out of Bloomingdale's, we overheard one exhausted shopper say, "It's hard to have to buy so

much."...) But it is also a world, several blocks from here, in which drug addiction, poverty, children having children, street violence and the demise of family, school and church are dramatically increasing.

We will need all the resources of our past, our traditions and one thing further, namely the grace and courage to listen to the Spirit and to follow when Jesus Christ leads.

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins." It is much easier to preach that and to hear it - as a word about an institution and institutional forms. It's easy to sit in a pew and agree: "Yes, the church should be reformed." But, my deep conviction is that here, as is always the case, God's word addresses us corporately - as a church - but also individually. The two cannot be separated.

So, if this word is to be heard and acted upon other than a nod of intellectual assent, it has to penetrate, get inside your life and mine and stir things up there.

The personal word here is that there are traditions in your life that require re-examining and reforming. Perhaps a dependence on alcohol, or drugs, or on success or hard work or status. Perhaps there is a long standing way of relating to a loved one - a spouse, a child, or parent, a friend - that has become petrified and needs new life. Perhaps there is a vocational direction, a world view, a political stance, which has given you comfort and security for years, but now needs to be changed.

The personal word here is that the agitator of change, the advocate of growth and reformation in your life - is not your impatience or your ego - but God's spirit. God is ready to do new things with your life: when you decide to allow Jesus to be your Lord and to follow him, you must be prepared to change.

What Luther recovered was the Gospel of grace. God is willing to forgive what is past, to free us from the past, to liberate us for a new and different life.

In Christ we are new creatures - part of God's new creation: the old has passed away, behold the new has come.

Do you hear it? Beneath all the traditional reasons, isn't it really why you and I are here this morning - on the outside chance that in Jesus Christ God just might take these lives of ours, our old habits, traditions, and make something new out of them? It requires faith and trust and not a little courage - this "always reforming" business: to see it in the world, to participate in it in your church, and to allow it in your life... I very simply invite you to it this morning. "Behold, I make all things new," he said.

Amen.